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ABSTRACT

This paper on multiage classrooms provides first steps toward a systemic understanding of the defining qualities of multiage classrooms and, from teachers' perspectives, the benefits of such classrooms for students, teachers, and parents. The multiage classroom movement in elementary schools is viewed as not just restructuring, but also as the beginning of the re-invention of schooling in the elementary grades. The paper presents comments of seven experienced teachers, based on interviews: the teachers agreed that a strong philosophical commitment is required of both teachers and schools, and that it must be maintained over time. The primary components of that commitment are: (1) the class has a minimum 2-year age span; (2) each student remains in a classroom for at least 2 years, (3) teachers learn to perceive each student as an individual; (4) children learn to perceive each other in terms of specific personal qualities and capabilities rather than grade groupings; (5) the classroom becomes a "family" of sorts, generating deeper relationships between students, teachers, and parents; and (6) teachers are motivated to structure learning activities to meet the needs of the individuals, rather than to teach to an imaginary "middle of the class." The student benefits of this innovation include: (1) quality relationships with teachers; (2) a more positive classroom climate; (3) better learning and enhanced self-esteem from increased inter-dependence and peer tutoring; (4) increased independence from teachers; and (5) availability of a wider range of roles within the group for each with students. The noted advantages for teachers include better relationships with students and with parents, less stress and more productive use of time, increased continuity in planning, and a more satisfying teaching experience. Few disadvantages of multiage classrooms for students, teachers or parents emerged from the interviews. (ET)

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FROM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES: THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF MULTIAGE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

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Multiage Classrooms: The Beginning of the Re-Invention of Schooling in the Elementary Grades

> We don't act like 4th, 5th, and 6th graders. We just act like kids at school, learning. We get to make a lot of choices by ourselves. Mostly everybody gets along. The teachers are the best. What I mean is, they are nice and they trust our opinions.
>
> A fifth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom

In 1991 a teacher of a grades 4-6 multiage classroom in the school district in which I then worked as the curriculum and assessment coordinator said to me that he was a bit tired of all the attention that high schools were receiving for their first small steps toward restructuring. "They're just nibbling at the edges. But we've gone far beyond that. We changed just about everything that we do, starting with putting three age levels together and keeping kids with the same teacher for three years, and on to integrative curriculum, a lot more student direction of learning and student responsibility, interdisciplinary projects, and more. Doesn't that count as restructuring?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him then. And I believe that even more today. The movement in elementary schools known primarily as **multiage classrooms** certainly counts. And it is more than restructuring; **the multiage movement is the beginning of the re-invention of schooling in the elementary grades.**

I interviewed seven teachers who shared among them 75 years of elementary school teaching, of which 39 years had taken place in multiage classrooms which they had designed and operated. What they articulated offers the

first steps toward a systemic understanding of (1) the defining qualities of multiage classrooms and (2) from these teachers' perspectives, the benefits of such classrooms for students, teachers, and parents.

Every single teacher whom I interviewed felt strongly that a multiage classroom begins with a philosophical commitment by a teacher and requires that teachers -- and schools -- maintain this commitment over time. "It can't be just a way to solve a numbers problem," Alice Leeds explained. "The teacher has to believe in and understand its value. Then you need school leadership and policy to support multiage, so they don't toss it away whenever the numbers shift a bit."

What are the elements of this philosophical commitment? Each of these seven teachers identified the following:

-- Multiage classrooms include students with at least a two year span in chronological age, who would previously have been placed in two different grades.

-- Each student remains in the same classroom with the same teacher(s) for at least two school years, and often longer.

-- The teacher learns to perceive each student not as a member of a grade grouping but as the individual she/he is, with a multiplicity of qualities and capabilities, not all of which are at the same level of development.

> Ms. B: "You have technically more than one grade in the classroom. But once they've walked through the door, I don't think about them as just second graders or third graders. They're kids, and they have varying degrees of abilities and you take them where they are, see what skills they

have, and what they need to work on. In this class, we have kids who are from six years old when they walk in to ten years old. Multiage is exactly what these kids are."

-- The children learn to perceive each other less and less in terms of grade membership and more and more in terms of specific personal qualities and capabilities. Chronological age becomes less important as a determinant of children's relationships, while developmental age becomes more important.

Ms. F: "In the multiage classroom there's a place for everybody; everybody fits somewhere. It's okay for a sixth grader, say, to be friends with a fourth grader. They care for each other, and they help each other."

-- A multiage classroom generates more profound relationships between teacher and students, among students, and between teacher and parents. Indeed each of these seven teachers used the metaphor of **family** to characterize the social qualities of their classrooms.

Ms. F: "It's a family, and a community. It's a feeling that you foster and that you look for."

Carol Hasson: "In a multiage classroom, the students along with the teacher take on roles similar to those in a family. The atmosphere is like a family. Comfort and trust are two key characteristics. Dependence, or interdependence, is also really important. Knowing that you will all be together for more than one year allows you to become invested in really getting to know and trust each other. And you are more likely to know personal things about each other. Parents are more likely to share problems

that are going on at home. You're just all working together more. That's what I think of as a family: everybody works together."

-- The qualities of the multiage classroom encourage the teacher to begin a transformation of her/his pedagogy. In this work the teacher moves from "teaching to an imaginary middle of the class" to conceiving and structuring learning activities that meet the needs of diverse individuals.

Jodi Lane: "There are a lot of different levels in a multi-age classroom, and you're able to individualize and have kids working at their own level, at their own pace. But you're also able to do a lot of small group activities, and some whole group ones, too, that are more open-ended, that meet all those different levels."

Mr. G: "Units or activities are planned for participation by the whole group much of the time. But the individual student's work may be more individualized; the expectations will probably vary, depending on the individual's needs."

In conversations I've had not only with these seven multiage teachers but with several dozen others, each has articulated a very similar perceptual and conceptual shift that is generated by the recognition of the defining element of the multiage classroom: a wider age range. Almost all teachers know that every single grade classroom contains students with a wide range of developmental levels, and that each child embodies her/his own wide range of developmental variety. Yet the very structure of age grading encourages most teachers to perceive their students as similar and to conceive of teaching as an activity directed toward the whole class.

In contrast, a multiage classroom is obviously different, and this difference

encourages teachers to begin a re-invention of their activity. Teachers are freed to perceive students as diverse, both in relation to each other and to their own set of qualities and capacities. This perceptual shift leads teachers toward reconceiving the nature of instruction and relationship within their classrooms.

The Benefits of Multiage Classrooms: For Students

> "There's one (fourth grade) kid in my class, he's very skilled, and he's in most of my groups. He does a lot with me because he's smart for his age, and we always work together because he's fun...If the other younger kids need help with something, I can help them -- you know, spelling or figuring out a math problem."
>
> A sixth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom
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> I think you learn to work with the younger kids and not to feel like you're better than them because you're older...When we mix the classes together, everyone seems to be more friendly to each other than when we were in separate grades. It seemed like you really had to learn to work with all different kids. You had to learn to work with them instead of thinking you're better.
>
> A sixth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom

What are the benefits for students of multiage classrooms, from the perspective of these seven experienced teachers?

1. Every teacher perceived an increase in the quality of relationship between teacher and student, experienced by students as follows: greater knowledge of the student's capacities and needs by the teacher; greater consistency of teacher behavior and expectations; greater felt comfort and security in the classroom; and greater mutual caring and concern.

> Ms. B: "There is the possibility of continuity with teachers. For some children, that is absolutely essential, for them to be comfortable, to feel secure, and nobody, if they're uncomfortable or are not settled, will learn to their best potential. And the kids, when they come in after I've had them for one year, they come back in and they're really on top of it. They really understand what's expected, and they're ready to work the first day they walk in."

> Leeds: "The benefits are, they get to evolve over a three or two year period, so they don't have to get to know the teacher again. Once they're integrated with the classroom, they're going to be there awhile, and they can feel comfortable and really settle in. So it builds a certain amount of confidence and continuity."

> Hasson: "For students I think the consistency of having the same teacher for more than one year is the biggest benefit of multiage classrooms. The consistency, knowing the expectations and the routine allows kids to feel safe, and you see fewer behavior problems and acting out to get attention. Kids who come in labelled as behavior problem kids -- usually by the second year, those behaviors are minimized because they're into the routine, they know the expectations, and it's consistent for them. Shy kids tend to become more relaxed and come out of their shells. Followers tend to feel safe to explore being leaders."

2. Each teacher noted that the social climate of a multiage classroom is more positive in a variety of ways. One element of this involves the recognition of diversity by the students and their increased acceptance and even valuing of difference among their peers.

> Ms. B: "I think the kids are also much more accepting of each other. They're not so judgmental because there is a huge range...So they're much more accepting of each other, and what kids do and what they can't do. I think they've come to realize that everybody is not always going to be good at everything. That some kids are really good at this -- So-and-so can do this really well, while this other area they really need to work a lot harder in. And they're much more accepting of that. And I think it's much more motivating when they don't feel out of place, put down. And their self-images are much more positive by the end of the year. They're much more eager to go on and to work harder by the end of the year because of how they feel about themselves."

> Mr. G: "It's almost like there's more opportunity for a greater number of kids to be able to have individual strengths and responsibilities. Whereas, different than in a single-grade situation where things always leveled off, I think there's more flexibility in multi-age grouping for a greater number of kids to be able to stretch."

> Ms. D: "It's just so safe in the multi-age setting for the kids to work on whatever level they need to be on. I think it's rewarding academically for a younger child to be able to work with a sixth grader, but also for a fourth grader who is perhaps really needy to see that, gee, there's a fifth grader doing the same thing, or a sixth grader doing the same thing that I'm doing, and it's okay. I think it's just a safer environment emotionally for kids."

Leeds: "So if they're a slow student or an accelerated student, it's not like, oh gee, of all the fifth grade, this kid can't do fractions yet, or this kid is way, way ahead. Where they're at is not so crucial, and it's not such a visible thing because it's a given that they're all over the place in ability levels, so they get to be where they are. Other students, of course, notice, but it doesn't seem to be such a stigma or a big deal."

Another element of the increased positivity in the social environment of the classroom is the reduction of negative norms.

Ms. F: "One of the biggest things I see...is all that negative role modeling that sixth grade students demonstrate, especially when our school only goes up to sixth grade, that cockiness, that 'I'm cool" stuff -- It was just virtually eliminated the first year (we went to multiage) because they have to be role models...All that pre-adolescent stuff, 25 of them in the classroom at one time. It's awful. And to split them up and have them be role models and to intertwine with other kids, it's a joy."

Mr. G: "It's not common to see or hear a child judge another one based on whether they're a good student or not. That's a rarity...They're aware of differences, though, and I think because of that awareness, they are much more inclined to try and remedy the situation, by helping another kid, as opposed to using it against them."

3. Each teacher described the ways in which students of different ages become increasingly interdependent within a multiage setting, because they often teach each other. This peer tutoring and interdependence leads to better learning and enhanced self-esteem.

Leeds: "(Teaching a peer) builds confidence that you really know something. If you really know something well, you can explain it to another child. And they have to know things well enough that they can explain it to someone else. They're constantly in that situation of explaining it to someone else."

Lane: "Putting kids together with partners allows them to teach something so they can learn it even better, as you have to really know something in order to teach it to another child. They all like to do that for each other, not just the older kids. The younger ones, too."

Ms. F: "Kids are more apt to offer help to each other in a multiage. They see somebody working on something and go, oh, I know how to do that; let me show you. They take it upon themselves."

Mr. G: "What's happened as time has gone on is that the younger kids have discovered that they have some things that they could help somebody else with, too. And so there's a constant asking, can so-and-so help me, and much more of a seeking each other out for assistance, not a direct relying on the teacher all the time. So they begin to see each other as having something to offer in terms of knowledge, as well as social things."

A related outcome to the increase of interdependence, then, is increased independence of children from the teacher as they learn to rely on each other as facilitators of learning.

Leeds: "I see students in my classroom become more willing to take care of questions or problems for themselves as the year, or years, go on. They ask me less often as the first option, and try to figure it out for themselves, either with a peer, or alone, first thing. Then, if they're still stuck, they come to me."

4. Every teacher noted that children in a multiage classroom experience a much wider range of group roles than in single grade experience. Each child has the opportunity to be "an elder," a leader, and role model in the classroom.

> Lane: "For many older kids, being able to be the person who is the role model is extremely important and encourages them to become responsible leaders. I have very few behavior problems this year, none really. And I think that a lot of that comes from being able to be the older kid in charge."
>
> Ms. B: (Children in the second year in the class) "...are really the leaders. If they have been in a class for a year, they take a leadership role, and for some of these kids, this is the first time this has ever happened to them...Also, they become role models for the younger kids and buddies and instructors in a lot of ways and helping the (new) kids to get settled in."
>
> Leeds: "As they get older, they get to become leaders and role models, and they become sort of assistants to the teacher. I don't mean this in a way that it takes away from their own work. I think sometimes parents worry about this, about children taking on responsibilities. I see it as very positive. It builds confidence, and they develop leadership skills and group skills."
>
> Hasson: "I was worried entering this school year because, looking at my fourth graders, I couldn't see any strong leaders emerging among them as they turned into fifth graders. I was concerned about this since I depend on the students I've already had in class to set the stage and become role models for the younger kids. Thankfully I was pleasantly surprised to see kids who'd been followers take on leadership roles and blossom into strong leaders and role models. I don't think this would have happened for these kids had this not been a multiage classroom."

Many children also experience a role that differs from that of their family birth order.

> Hasson: "Multiage gives kids an opportunity to experience roles different from those they have in their family. For instance, a child who is the youngest at home will get a chance to reverse that role and become an older child. She'll get to feel what that's like and have that kind of responsibility. She'll have the opportunities that go along with being an older child as well as the negative things about being older. And if you're an older child in your family, it's vice versa. Experiencing these different roles can help kids gain a better understanding of themselves, and of their relationships with siblings."

5. Each teacher explained that a multiage classroom eases the stress of entering a new classroom for the child and allows the teacher to pay more attention to each new student.

> Leeds: "When students enter in, they're not part of a huge group of kids that are all new. Maybe half or two-thirds have already been there and help them adjust. It's not just one teacher getting them ready; they have a lot of students who are helping them adapt. In fact, in our classroom, we have a peer partner program. They all have peer partners, so they don't have to wait every time they have a question on procedure or content or whatever. There's always a student right there who can help them answer a question...And I can get to know each new student much more quickly because there's a manageable number of them."

> Several teachers noted that multiage classrooms help children to focus on

learning just by reducing the number of transitions in their school career.

> Ms. F: "Another benefit for the kids is the continuity from year to year. One fourth grader was saying how hard fourth grade was because it was such a change. And I said, 'Well, you should talk to Jonathan about fifth grade, and how it's different.' And he had already, and Jonathan had said that fifth grade is so much better because you know the teacher, you know what needs to happen. When they go into fifth grade, there's that familiarity and that comfort that they don't have to worry, and therefore often the academics take over."

6. Several teachers reflected that multiage classrooms may help to resolve the dilemma of failing a student during the elementary years.

> Ms. B: "If kids need an extra year to spend in the class, they can have it. Instead of spending two years they can spend three years. And there's half of the class that they've been with that they can be with again, and the stigma that has always been associated with repeating or spending extra time in a group isn't there. We've done this with a few kids, and they do better with the extra time. And nobody calls them a failure."

The Benefits of Multiage Classrooms: For Teachers

> Yeah, if you stay with a teacher for three years, well, she knows what you're good at and what you can do. And it makes you work harder...And when we're the oldest, we can help the fourth graders and be, like role models. That's how you act and stuff. They take on what you do. Like, if you act good, that's probably what they'll

act like, because you set good examples.

Question: Do you remember what the older kids did when you were in fourth grade?

I remember some of it. They were always getting their work done and stuff, and acting pretty good and stuff.

A sixth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom

All seven teachers spoke with conviction about the benefits of multiage classrooms for teachers. Obviously some of the benefits for teachers complement the benefits for students.

1. When asked to rank order the benefits of multiage classrooms for teachers, each teacher listed "deeper, more profound relationships with kids" and "greater personal rewards in seeing students' growth and learning" as the most significant reward. Teachers consistently spoke of these two outcomes in the same paragraphs, identifying them as interrelated phenomena.

Leeds: "I think the biggest benefit is that you get to work with the child over two or three years, and when the child comes back you can pretty much pick up where you left off. You can set very long-term goals for children; you don't have to say by the end of the year I've got to get them here. You take a longer and a broader vision with the child, and I think in that way your goals are not as superficial. You don't just say, I've got to get them to know their times tables. So you think in terms of, I'd like to see this child develop more social confidence, I'd like to see this child be willing to take on more leadership or take on more challenge, and I'd like to see them be able to

follow through. You start to see each child more as a person rather than just as somebody you've got to give so many skills to, and you work on things in a broader way. I used to say that you have a second and a third chance, but now I see it as much more than that. You take a look at the person; you develop a relationship with them; you develop a relationship with their family; so you see them in a broader context, not just as a kid who is in your classroom. You develop more compassion; you develop a relationship, because you care. You grow to love the children, and you feel relationship with them. So that, I think, is the big one, that you get to know those kids and work with them and see them progress over a long period of time. And it's always wonderful to witness their growth."

Lane: " Being able to know right where they are at the beginning of the second year is great. If I were to send kids on after one year, I just wouldn't see their continued growth. And there are some kids who really need that second year to grow. It gives me wonderful feedback when I have kids for two years, and they didn't quite get it that first year. But by the end of that second year, wow, look how much they've got. And that's really rewarding for me. "

Hasson: "I think you become more invested a child's education when you teach that child for two years or more. You know the child is going to be with you, and you know that I'm playing a big role in this person's education. And I think you care more because you get to know the child more. Sometimes you might go through a whole year having a child in your class and not ever really get to know her. That child goes on, and you always wonder, did I do enough? In a multiage you always have that second year to do even more."

Mr. G: "I think time is the one issue that is really a big difference as far as being able to have a kid from one year to the next. I've always felt that there are certain children that I would say, this kid's going to get there, but the kid

just needs some time. And I would never see it happen, because they would leave. Whereas now I could say, about a particular kid, I'm not going to get too uptight about this kid this year. I know what the kid needs; the kid isn't really ready; the kid needs some time. I'm not going to get on his or her case right now. I don't need to; it's just going to make them anxious. And then the following year it's like, I knew this kid needed some time. That's all it took."

Ms. F: "For myself, it's much more rewarding to have a child for more than one year because you see the blossoming. Some of my kids in this class I've had three years, and it's just incredible to look back and see them. One student my colleague had for three years, and he kept him for a fourth year because he needed it. And just to see how that child has grown is really rewarding, much more so than straight grades."

2. Every teacher described the ways in which multiage classrooms minimize the stress of starting a new school year and support productive use of school time right from the first week of school.

Ms. B: "It takes a good two months to settle a new class in: to find out where they're at, to get them to understand the routine and expectations. And for me to get to know where they were, how they work, so I'm comfortable with them. But with a multi-age, the first week of school, we're rolling. I mean, I never had that before. The first year of multiage, I was shocked, I was absolutely blown away. I went home saying, this is too easy. It was so much less stressful than it had ever been before. Now when I start the year, I know half the kids already, their strengths and weaknesses. I know what they missed last year and where the holes are. I know where I can go with them. And the (new) kids seem to fit right in."

Hasson: "There's none of that time in the beginning of the year where the teacher has to get to know the students and the students get to know the teacher, and all that's wasted in the process, especially for kids who have a difficult time with transitions and new environments."

Leeds: "One thing is that every year you don't have to integrate a whole new class of kids. You really can integrate the new kids more easily into the room, and the other children help you do that. One girl said a couple of years ago when she became a fifth grader and the new fourth graders came in, she said, 'You know, it's much easier when you come back.' The kids really help get each other going."

Ms. A: "At the end of the year I know exactly where they left off. When they come back in, it's just amazing how much things fly from that point on."

3. Each teacher explained that a key benefit of multiage classrooms is the development of stronger and more productive relationships with the parents of their students.

Hasson: "Kids know that I've gotten a relationship going with their parents, and the communication is much more frequent and more comfortable. So I think that it makes the kid know that both people (teacher and parent) are communicating. I feel like I develop a really intimate relationship with my parents over the two years, and I think that's really good for kids to know."

Ms. B: "You really get to know parents because a lot of times, the parents come in with the same set of fears and expectations. You have to get to know the parents in order for them to help their kids and be supportive of the school system and know what we're doing and where we're going. After one

year they get to know me, and so they know how I'm handling their kid. We can work together through problems that their kid has, maybe concerns they have. We have to work together to do this. They get so if they have concerns, they can call me or write me, and I can talk to them, call them and say 'I really think your child will benefit from summer school this summer to keep them going, or they really need to be worked with on this or that behavior. This is what we're working on. Or maybe there's been some stress in the family for some reason, and we can talk about it, work it through and help their child."

Leeds: "I really think parents make more of a commitment to their relationship with me as their kid's teacher in a multiage than they did in a straight grade. It's like, well, they know they're stuck with me for a long time, and I'm going to be important to their kid, so they're more willing to work at it, to put more effort into things."

Ms. A: " I think the relationship that I am able to develop with the parents is incredible. Even parents who tend to be a little hard to get to know -- When you have them for two years, you see them double the time that you would see them in one year and by the end of those two years you really know them well. "

Ms. D: "When you have kids more than one year, you begin to build a relationship with the parents, and it builds. The first year it might be kind of sketchy, but after a year, in the second year and maybe the third year, even, it's different. It's not your typical parent-teacher relationship, in that it can be more of a partnership because it builds from year to year. I find that to be really easy. It makes it easier to deal with kids because you've got two or three adults working for the kid."

Ms. F: "I find them (parents) much easier to approach, and they approach

me more often. I get phone calls at home or notes or whatever. I think that there's a comfort for them, too. It isn't formal at all after the first year; it really is quite different."

Mr. G: "There used to be a formality to the parent-teacher conferencing or the getting together for whatever before. And now, (with multiage) it's become much more of an open dialogue that you can have with the parent about their child. I find myself being a lot more candid than I used to be."

Ms. F: "It's been very interesting in the last year and recently, to see more and more requests, because we originally had said that we'll keep the child for two years because we didn't think it might be wise to keep them for three years. And now we're getting more and more requests to keep the child for three years, from parents, which is real interesting."

4. Several teachers identified the continuity from year to year that multiage classes create as a significant benefit.

Ms. F: "Another benefit for the teachers is the continuity from year to year. You start thinking and planning in cycles of several years, and once you get the hang of it, it seems to make things easier."

Hasson: "Planning instruction is a lot easier in a multiage classroom. You know the kids, their needs, likes, and dislikes. You aren't spending all that time trying to figure our what they need, so your units are better. The following year, you know where they've been and where they need to go."

5. Finally every teacher expressed a philosophical commitment to multiage classrooms and in one way or another noted that such a commitment brought focus

and renewed purpose to their professional lives.

> Mr. G: "I think one of the benefits for me on a personal level has been that I've always felt that this (multiage) was what teaching should really be and that this was the natural, if you want to call it that, way to teach; that it was very unnatural to take children from a natural setting like a family and then put them into this building or space and then work under the assumption that because you are a nine year old, that means you have this bulk of information that you have to master and learn because Houghton Mifflin, or whoever publishes the textbook, says in the fourth-grade textbook that that's what nine-year olds need to know. It just went against a lot of my own native instincts about how I felt kids learned and how I felt that I should be teaching them. It's a lot more work in one sense, but in the other sense it's much more rewarding because I feel that I'm doing what children need for me to do as a teacher."

The Benefits of Multiage Classrooms: For Parents

> Your parents get to know your teacher after awhile. They're not afraid to talk to them and tell them stuff. So, sometimes I don't like it that much, but most of the time it's pretty good, you know, that your parents and the teacher can talk and get along and help you and stuff.
>
> A sixth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom

The teachers also saw several clear benefits for parents in the multiage classrooms of their children. These benefits focus on the increase in comfort that parents feel when they can get to know a teacher over more than a year and the greater likelihood that parent and teacher can work together to support a child's

growth and learning.

Hasson: "I think some parents are really afraid to come into schools and are intimidated, and they feel a lot more comfortable not having to get to know another person the next year. Both (a colleague) and I had a parent who last year hardly ever came to conferences. She started coming halfway through the year, and then she started to come for the rest of the year. This year she started out the year coming, and I know that wouldn't happen if she'd started out with totally new teachers. I think she would have still felt that intimidation. So I feel like they feel more comfortable with you, and they're used to your routines. All my parents know, as fourth grade parents, what the expectations are and the routines for homework. So the next year it's a lot easier because they know what to expect. For instance, all my kids buy binders to organize themselves. They know that in fourth grade they're going to use them, and in fifth grade they're going to use them. And the parents get into the routine for that. I think routines in people's crazy lives are really important, and that's one really important thing that multiage gives parents."

Ms. A: "Every time that a child goes to a new teacher from year to year, there's a certain amount of stress for the child and for the parent. And I think that-- it (multiage) takes away that stress for a year. They think, oh, yeah, we know how it's going to be-- I think it makes life a little easier sometimes. I have such strong parent support in the classroom. At the beginning of this year, right from the first week of school, I had parents from last year say, when can we come in? And they were able to start coming in that first and second week, whereas with the parents that I didn't quite know yet, I wanted to wait until we had an opportunity to talk and discuss what their role would be in the classroom. So I think for those parents there wasn't that lag time either, as well as for the kids. They were able to get

right back into it and not have to wait around for anything."

Leeds: "For parents, they really get to know the teacher. I think that's a big plus. They know who is with their kid every day all day long. And they get to develop a certain comfort level, so if there is a touchy subject or if they're concerned about something, they can talk. I've had parents talk to me about things that were good for me to be aware of but that may have been difficult for them to talk about. You just develop more of an ease. I've worked with parents over three years who've had challenging situations at home, and you develop a whole rapport around their kid. They don't have to readjust every year and think, well, how is it going to be for my child this year and what's the teacher going to expect, what kind of homework is there going to be, what are they going to do about this, that and the other? They get to know what the story is. So just the way the child gets comfortable, the parents can get comfortable. And if there are some things that they're not comfortable with, usually they're worked out in the first year, and from there it's smooth sailing."

Hasson: "I think that when you only have a student for one year, it's really hard to notice any big--except every once in awhile--academic progress. It's hard to see where kids started and where they ended, unless you really document all along the way. And even then in one year it's hard to see a lot of progress. Sometimes parents are the ones that see their child making that progress more than teachers do, and parents are feeling more positive than teachers do at the end of certain periods of time in the kid's life and say, 'Wow, this is where they were, and this is where they are.' And I think that, having a child for more than one year, you can share the enthusiasm with the parent and say, 'Gosh, remember two years ago when so-and-so came in my room, and here's a piece of work that they were doing then. And now here it is two years later, and, wow, look at this book that they started reading, and now look what kind of books they can read!" I think

that is really positive, because parents know now that you can see that and appreciate it more than you could when you only had their child for one year."

Losses or Disadvantages of Multiage Classrooms

> I think (multiage) is easier for the teacher, because if the teacher's busy, some sixth grader or somebody who knows could go and help a kid that needs help.
>
> A fifth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom

Are there losses or disadvantages in multiage classrooms for children? Absolutely none, each of these teachers said.

What about for teachers?

"It's a lot of work," Mr. G. said. "It's a tremendous amount of work."

"It's a lot more work at the start," Ms. F said. "And later on it's still more work than straight grades are."

"Every year is different," Ms. D explained. "We thought after the third year we'd go into our fourth year, which would be repeating the first year, and we'd have it made. Well, it wasn't anything like our first year. So every year has been different, and that's because of the class and the makeup. And that's both a challenge, and a lot of work."

Ms. B's perspective on the workload was a bit different. "It does take a lot of

preparation time. And the first year I worked on this, it took awhile. I guess any time you switch grade levels or add a grade, you don't have the materials necessarily that you might need for extending the ranges that you might have. So it takes awhile to build up the reading books and the manipulatives, that kind of thing. Sometimes having to extend, having things that we do open-ended so they will take in all of the ranges of ability, takes some work. This is the fourth year, so I'm finding less problems pulling out materials that I've used and adding to them. I think after the initial shock in trying to figure out how to deal with the ranges that you've got, I don't think it's that much different in a lot of ways."

"Parents don't always understand the benefits at first," Leeds noted. "So I think it's important to share with parents and encourage their understanding of the benefits. That can be somewhat challenging. On the positive side, parents sell the idea of multiage to each other just as the children do. This year a group of concerned parents worked with a couple of teachers in our school to evaluate our multiage program, and they were really turned around. They've become our best spokespeople for multiage."

Finally Leeds identified one unanticipated negative."Well, you do feel more of a commitment. You can look at this as a negative or a positive. You feel more of a commitment to your kids. For me to think about leaving at any point, if I would ever think about leaving, I would be leaving some kids midstream. I would always feel like I was leaving in the middle of the year. So you make a bigger commitment to a school when you become a multiage teacher. You're making a bigger commitment to a group of children. And that's a responsibility that you take on as a multiage teacher. You really feel like if you leave, you need to help bridge that transition. It's never a great time to leave."

Are there losses or disadvantages in multiage classrooms for parents? None of these teachers articulated any. "I know concerns that parents have," Ms. A noted, "but I haven't seen any negatives or had any parents tell me about anything like that. Ms. Leeds commented, "Of course, if a parent is having a problem with the teacher, I think if they're anxious, then they get more anxious. They think, oh, gosh, I'm going to have to deal with this teacher for two or three years. Parents, I think, are more likely to come up early on and try to get it worked out. They're not as likely to wait it out. So it might seem negative, but my experience is that it ends up being positive."

Multiage Is the Beginning of School Re-Invention

> I stayed with Ms. (teacher's name) three years, and she was nice. I got where I knew everything she would say. I could almost say it before she said it. She would look at me and she'd go, "You been with me in this class so long!" That was really nice.
>
> A sixth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom

> The younger kids depend on the older kids a lot. And sometimes the older kids depend on the younger ones, because it's pretty amazing what some of them can do. Some of them, you think, oh man, they don't know that question -- But then a lot of them know it. That's pretty amazing...The younger kids really do look up to us, because if they need help or something, they're always asking an older kid.
>
> A sixth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom

Multiage classrooms are indeed far more than restructuring; they are

the beginning of the re-inventing of school. It is much too soon to understand where this re-invention of the elementary classroom will lead. But it is fair to say that the model of the multiage classroom -- in its definition, its nurturing of relationship, and the directions it propels teachers to explore, particularly in terms of children's capabilities, curriculum, instruction, and self-direction in learning -- finally shatters the egg-carton, industrial model of schooling. The multiage model offers insight into what schools for the 21st century might become, if they were designed first and foremost to promote the health, growth, and learning of children as whole persons, because well educated and healthy persons will no doubt be effective citizens and workers who will commit their efforts to the betterment not only of themselves and their families but of their communities and the society as a whole.

> I was in a regular fourth grade in (another state). I like the multiage better. It's more like different people -- kinda different people have to learn to get along good, and they do!
>
> A sixth grade student in a grades 4-6 multiage classroom